



“The Main body at the church” St. Paul’s and the Revolutionary War

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April 2010

It’s not surprising that St. Paul’s Church was a common point of reference during the American Revolutionary War. While only the exterior was complete in 1776, the imposing rectangular stone and brick church, located on the treeless village green, stretched 50 feet over the area’s rolling streams and fields which had been cleared and farmed since the 17th century. Located at the intersection of four major roads, it was a geographical and transportation center of Westchester County, New York.

If the neighborhood of the church at Eastchester -- as it was often called at the time -- was a peaceful area, remote from the conflict of the Revolutionary War, it would have been cited as simply an incomplete enterprise stalled by the onset of the war. But, of course, it was not. Rather, the church stood at the center of an area that experienced almost constant military activity from September 1776 through the end of hostilities in 1783. For that reason, the church played a prominent role in the logistics, operations and strategic outlooks of the American, British, Hessian, Loyalist and even French armies.

The incidents at St. Paul’s did not determine the ultimate balance of the conflict; the War for American Independence was not won based on possession of the church. And yet, the history of St. Paul’s during the American Revolution reveals something about the rugged character of the war, as experienced by one area of the young republic. Perhaps more importantly, the ebb and flow of possession of the church area indicates which army had more firm control of what became a critical “neutral ground”, and which side commanded the strategic balance in the New York theatre, among the most important battlefields in the Revolutionary War.

The first use of the church for military purposes presaged most of the subsequent utilization of the structure. The Continental army established a general hospital for sick soldiers from early September through mid October 1776, following the withdrawal from Long Island after the Battle of Brooklyn. Originally seen as safely behind American lines, the church housed men from different states, and of many ranks, who were removed from their regiments at various New York posts and transported to the facility. The ground of the building was little more than a dirt floor and perhaps a few boards, but the size, location and strength of the stone and brick edifice appealed to directors of the American hospital



James Varnum, from Rhode Island, was treated at St. Paul's Church in October 1776 when it was an American field hospital, and later led troops in a skirmish at the church.

department. Groans of men stricken with dysentery, small pox, typhoid and typhus echoed in the shell of the building.

The invasion of Westchester County by British and Hessian forces in mid October changed the strategic balance of the church neighborhood. Continental army troops under Colonel John Glover of Massachusetts fought a gallant delaying action about a mile from the church at the Battle of Pell's Point on October 18, helping to shield the retreat of the main body of Washington's army from northern Manhattan to White Plains. But the church/hospital was in range of British artillery, and the Americans were forced to evacuate the sick, protecting this perilous removal with forces along the western side of the Hutchinson River. Within a day of American withdrawal, the British and Hessian troops rolled into the church, continuing its use as a hospital, perhaps utilizing straw bedding left behind by the fleeing Patriots. The church was a Hessian/English medical post for several weeks, reflecting firm British control of the area.

But this was a fluid moment in the area's Revolutionary War history; there wasn't any neutral ground yet. After failing to fully defeat Washington's army at the Battle of White Plains October 28 – November 3, the bulk of the British army withdrew from Westchester County and invested Fort Washington in northern Manhattan, leaving the church area safe, for the moment. A war council attended by Generals William Heath, Benjamin Lincoln and others convened in the church vicinity in mid January 1777, considering an attack on nearby Fort Independence. Called within days of the great American victories on the other side of the New York theatre, at Trenton and Princeton in New Jersey, that conference demonstrated Patriot strength and presence near the church. That meeting, though, marked the last time for several years that the Americans held comfortable sway over the St. Paul's vicinity. The major reason was the means through which the British chose to contest the area, and American reluctance to launch an invasion of New York City.

With the main elements of the Redcoats firmly parked in New York City, the British permitted or encouraged Loyalist units camped near the King's Bridge on the Harlem River to extend English power into Westchester County, creating the neutral ground in southern Westchester County beginning about March 1777. Over the next several years, Loyalist units and British regulars were consistently strong enough to launch armed raids across the St. Paul's area seeking supplies, demoralizing Patriot sympathies and confronting American army units. Since many of these Loyalist provincial units included young men from Westchester County, who knew the roads and had pre-war grievances, it's not a stretch to call this a period of civil war. No doubt many of those soldiers were familiar with the church at Eastchester, facilitating use of the building as hospital, barracks and supply base. Reverend Samuel Seabury, the Anglican rector of the church in 1776, remained loyal to King George III, and served as chaplain to provincial units operating in Westchester County, certainly advising them of the location of the church. The Loyal American Regiment and Emmerich's Chasseurs, among others, utilized the church as a military facility.

The Continental army held a line in northern Westchester County, across the Croton River, and it was Washington's fond hope through the war to actually invade New York

City and vanquish the Redcoats, especially after 1778 when the French alliance opened up the possibility of naval support in New York harbor. But the French fleet could not penetrate the Narrows and the Americans were never quite strong enough to launch an assault on the city. Additionally, despite political pressures, General Washington was reluctant to use the Continental army as a police force. While he occasionally deployed troops to protect civilian life and property in critical areas, he maintained that an excessive use of his forces for such duties would dilute the overall strength of the American army, which needed its combined numbers to eventually battle the British and win the war. As a result, much of the responsibility for policing the area around St. Paul's fell to the often overmatched militia. Broader events also determined conflict in the church vicinity, such as a raid by a British force in the fall of 1778 that destroyed the fine Eastchester home of Patriot leader Stephen Ward in retaliation for the unwillingness of the Continental Congress to meet with a British peace commission headed by Lord Carlisle.

The consequence was a four-year stalemate and the default that led to the "neutral ground," or no-man's land between the armies. The church was at the center of this "neutral ground" or "debatable ground," as some called it; the whistle of musket balls through the air and the pounding of horse hoofs created a cadence of sounds war on the grounds. The church was often referenced as the place where Loyalist units moving north from the King's Bridge camps chased Patriot troops. Or, American army units moving south from Patriot positions in northern Westchester to arrest Tories confronted British patrols. A considerable portion of the local population evacuated, leaving the area to the warring armies and halting normal civilian life, including religious services.

Perhaps typical was an incident August 22, 1777 that led to the capture of a Continental army physician from Rhode Island, Dr. Elias Cornelius. Short of medical supplies, Patriot forces consisting of Continental troops under General James Varnum and a company of Connecticut militia moved south through the St. Paul's vicinity, foraging for surgical instruments and medicine. Dr. Cornelius's presence reflects a wise decision to assign to the raiding party a medically knowledgeable officer who could determine the relative value of the instruments. The American column surprised a small British force, which included Loyalists and apparently African American soldiers, took prisoners, and removed medical supplies from the church, which was serving as a general hospital for Crown units.



An American raid on the British hospital at St. Paul's in August 1777 gathered valuable medical instruments, similar to these authentic replicas now on display at the site.

From there, the Americans moved south toward the King's Bridge and west toward Mile Square and the Hudson River, seeking other British outposts where they might obtain medical supplies. Dr. Cornelius accompanied these troops, but later in the afternoon returned to Eastchester, presuming the main body of General Varnum's troops was still near the church. But to the doctor's surprise, "I found our troops had left the place and retired back (north, toward the Croton River) and the Enemies scouting parties were in the town. On riding into town, while passing a corner, four of the Enemy started from a behind a shed, one of whom seized my horse, another seized me by the coat and legs asked me where I belonged." Dr. Cornelius was captured and transported to one of the notorious British prison ships in New York harbor, escaping in February 1778.

The incident, similar to other confrontations in 1777-1778, showed that while American forces could penetrate the St. Paul's neighborhood, they lacked sufficient troop strength to sustain themselves for long periods of time.

Another representative encounter occurred October 3, 1779, and it involved Lieutenant Erasmus Gill, from Virginia, commanding a small unit of Continental army mounted light dragoons, who often patrolled the church grounds. Aware of this pattern, a British/Hessian force moved north and staged a calculated ambush, stationing English infantry in an abandoned house just north of St. Paul's, which is captured in a remarkable document in German on display in the St. Paul's museum, titled, *Plan von dem Hinterhalt by Ost Chester*, ("Plan for the ambush near East Chester."). Lieutenant Gill and his troops approached the church from a different direction than the British expected, and, in a brief but sharp encounter, battled their way through the attempted ambush, losing two men killed, and escaping north on the road to White Plains, although Gill was thrown from his horse and captured by the enemy.

The year 1781 proved a turning point in the strategic situation at St. Paul's. The previous year had been perhaps the worst for Patriot fortunes in Westchester, with Loyalist and British troops launching raids across the county with impunity. In January 1781 General Washington reluctantly agreed to dispatch Continental army troops to protect life and property in the neutral ground by attacking British and provincial camps around the King's Bridge. On a wintry January 21, hundreds of American troops, under the command of Major General Samuel Holden Parsons moved south and through the St. Paul's vicinity.

General Parsons, posting "the main body at the church," stationed three regiments in Eastchester to cover the retreat, while forces under Lieutenant Colonel William Hull moved further to attack British positions in Throg's Neck and several camps near the Harlem and Bronx Rivers. The British army was entrenched in this area, but the Americans inflicted a considerable degree of damage, freed American prisoners and seized enemy soldiers and booty, including horses and cattle. As the Americans withdrew toward Eastchester, the British advance parties pursued the Continentals to within a mile of the church where Hull formed a rear guard to delay them. The British pursued the Americans to the shadows of the church where Parsons' infantry, concealed behind stone walls on either side of the road, battered the British with a well directed fire,

causing them to disperse. Heavier snow further slowed the British, permitting the Americans to return to the Croton River posts.

Again we see the Americans could move a large force into the church area, achieve a short-term objective, such as damaging the Loyalist army camps, and then withdraw further up-county.



A final and significant incident worthy of note occurred in July 1781, and it was part of the movement of American and British troops down to Yorktown, Virginia for what turned out to be the decisive battle of October 1781. Mounted French troops under the Duc De Lauzon, following an exhausting overnight 40 mile road from Ridgebury, Connecticut, occupied the church as part of an American probing movement through Westchester and toward Manhattan. Lauzon's colorful cavalry was part of the French expeditionary force under the Comte de Rochambeau that had reached Rhode Island a year earlier. The movement of early July involved thousands of Continental troops, some commanded by

General Washington himself, representing the heaviest concentration of Patriot forces near St. Paul's since the major fighting of October 1776

While it turned out to be a probing movement, and not an invasion of Manhattan, the incident demonstrated American strength and altered the landscape of the neutral ground. British and Hessian troops were able to withstand some of the American attacks, and some of the Loyalists camps which were the source of most of the raids were shifted, but the Patriots inflicted extensive damage on the enemy and transferred their lines several miles south of the Croton River; the vicinity was more firmly in American hands than at any time since the fall of 1776. The balance of power at St. Paul's had swung decisively in the Patriots' favor, and the surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown three months later confirmed the overall shift of momentum towards the Americans and independence.

It took a couple of more years, in 1783, when the British evacuated New York City, for civilian life on some scale to resume in the St. Paul's vicinity. Withdrawal of the Redcoats and disbanding of the provincial units removed the major source of the neutral ground experience and the bitterness of the war at St. Paul's. The ordinary rhythms of life in a farming village, including religious services, which had been impossible during the war years, could slowly return to some semblance of normal. The same features that made the church a fixture during the war -- size, strength of construction and location -- facilitated its function as a focal point of the civic and religious life of a town seeking to rebuild after the devastating impact of the war. The main difference, of course, was the successful War for Independence, which meant that the residents of the re-constituted community were Americans, and no longer British subjects.